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TAGS: PHUM PGOV PREL LG

SUBJECT: DAS KRILLA STRESSES TOLERANCE AND INCLUSION IN LATVIA

Classified By: Ambassador Charles W. Larson for Reason 1.4(d).

¶1. (C) Summary: DAS for DRL Jeffrey Krilla visited Riga March 5 and 6 for roundtable discussions with ethnic Russian and other minority groups in Latvia. He also met with the Latvian Minister of Integration, MFA officials, and an ethnic Russian member of parliament. While the Integration Minister and representatives at the MFA described a government reaching out to minority communities and striving for integration, NGO representatives painted a different picture.

They roundly criticized the GOL for what they considered lackluster efforts to integrate minorities--asserting that the GOL pays lip service to issues of tolerance and integration out of political necessity. Throughout the visit, DAS Krilla urged the GOL to embrace minority communities--and counseled minority groups to engage fully in the democratic process. He concluded the visit with media interviews with Russian and Latvian dailies, where is stressed the importance of inclusion for all members of Latvian society. End Summary.

Roundtable Discussions

¶2. (U) DAS Krilla and Ambassador Larson met ethnic Russians from NGOs, the media, and business to learn the challenges and opportunities faced by the ethnic Russian community in Latvia. The participants sketched a complex picture in which older ethnic Russians nurse a sense of grievance towards Latvian society, while the younger members are somewhat more pragmatic and forward-looking. The 400,000 non citizens living in Latvia came up repeatedly, with several participants expressing real annoyance that they must naturalize to become a citizen in the land in which they were born.

¶3. (U) DAS Krilla and Ambassador Larson next met NGO leaders representing a broad array of minorities in Latvia: a leader in the Roma community, a member of a gay rights organization, a women's issues advocate, and a leader of a group representing those of African descent living in Latvia. The entire group roundly criticized the GOL as feebly paying lip service to tolerance and inclusion--perhaps because the government feels it must use such rhetoric as an EU member state. George Steele, an African-American who has been living in Latvia since the mid 1990s stated that tolerance towards people of color has deteriorated since the mid-1990s.

Evita Gosa said her gay rights organization, Mozaika, feels totally shut out of discussions with the government; she added that Mozaika is only acknowledged by the GOL at all when the government is worried it may get some heat from EU institutions if it totally ignores the group.

GOL Officials

¶4. (C) Latvian Integration Minister Oskars Kastens stressed the GOL's efforts to integrate minority communities. He

provided a detailed rundown of different programs and initiatives that his ministry pursues--to teach the Latvian language, to encourage naturalization, etc. However, Kastens evinced no real passion or sense of urgency regarding integration or the promotion of tolerance. In a separate meeting with MFA Under Secretaries, Ilgvars Klava and Edgars Skuja, DAS Krilla again stressed the need for the Latvian political elite to lead the society on integration issues--and to publicly condemn anti-Semitism, racism, and other manifestations of intolerance.

¶15. (C) Ethnic Russian and Jewish Member of Parliament, Boriss Cilevics (Harmony Center party), provided perhaps the most balanced picture of challenges to integration in modern Latvia. Cilevics spoke with compassion about the ethnic Latvian community's historical trauma under Soviet occupation. He spoke of the ethnic Latvians themselves as thinking and acting as a minority group striving to preserve its own culture. On the other hand, he emphasized that the GOL's specific policies in the decade and a half since Latvia regained independence may be creating yet another historical dynamic in which the ethnic Russians in modern Latvia feel marginalized and excluded from the democratic process. Cilevics concluded that the Russian community in Latvia has not yet given up on full civic participation, but stressed that GOL policies and more inclusive rhetoric from the Latvian elite will be crucial in the years ahead.

Press

¶16. (U) DAS Krilla gave interviews to two Russian and one Latvian language newspapers. In each, he urged the GOL to engage its minority communities and ensure they are

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integrated into the mainstream of society. To the Russian readers in particular he stressed that participation within the democratic system is the most practical way to improve conditions within any specific community. He also emphasized that the USG is interested in the concerns and challenges faced by all people living in Latvia, not simply ethnic Latvians.

Comment

¶17. (C) During the visit, the picture that NGOs painted of a government going through the motions on matters of integration and tolerance has some truth: Latvian officials are still unsure about just how fully and how best to engage and embrace the ethnic Russian community and minorities more broadly. Given the historical trauma of Soviet occupation and Latvians' very limited exposure to minorities in recent years, this is perhaps not surprising. However, globalization is bringing more and more people with different backgrounds to Latvia. This reality, along with the fact that well over one third of the population of the country is not ethnic Latvian, makes it imperative that Latvia embrace a more open social model. Within this context, DAS Krilla's visit helped emphasize the importance of tolerance and integration in a society that is struggling to find an identity that includes all those living within its borders.
End Comment.

¶18. (U) This cable was cleared by DAS Krilla.
LARSON